



DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR

INFORMATION SERVICE

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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INTERIOR ISSUES SOME BASIC DATA ON DUCK SPECIES NOW IN SHORT SUPPLY

Because recently issued hunting regulations have created more than the usual interest in two species of wild duck--the canvasback and the redhead--the Fish and Wildlife Service of the Department of the Interior offers some basic information on these two species and their relationship to migratory bird management.

Studies on the harvesting of these two ducks indicate that hunters in at least States have an opportunity to shoot canvasbacks and those in at least 28 States can shoot redheads. The choice shooting of each species, however, is in a more limited area.

Studies also show that out of 100 canvasbacks alive in the fall, 71 will be dead within one year; of these 47 will be killed by hunters, and 24 will have died from other causes. About 400,000 are taken each year by hunters.

Standard practice in management of the duck resource has been to regulate the duck harvest by adjusting the total bag limit and hunting dates. But because the various species of wild ducks do not react alike to the same set of conditions, it is becoming increasingly evident that periodically, at least, preferential treatment must be given certain species in fixing bag limits and seasons.

For example, conditions on the breeding grounds which might be good for the early nesters might not be good for late nesters; some species are much wanted by hunters while others are almost ignored. Some adjust readily to changing conditions while others are adversely affected by changes.

Canvasbacks and redheads have been doubly hit. They suffer continual gun pressure during the season and their nesting success has been seriously affected by drought conditions on the breeding grounds for three years in a row.

The canvasback and the redhead are two of 20 species of the so-called "diving ducks" found in America. They derive their name "diving" from the fact that many of them dive as deep as 30 feet for food. In addition to the diving species, North America has 16 species of puddle or dabbling ducks which feed in shallow water, usually "up-ending", with tail feathers above the water, securing food from the bottom of the pond or lake. America also has three merganser ducks, one ruddy duck and two tree ducks.

There are certain other characteristics which help distinguish a diving duck from a puddle or dabbling duck. The legs of the dabbling duck are close to the middle of the body, it swims with its tail well out of the water and it springs into the air when taking off on flight. The diving duck has its legs near the rear of the body, it usually swims with its tail close to the water and when taking off for flight it runs and flaps along the surface of the water before getting into the air.

The canvasback is exclusively a North American bird. It is considered by many to be the best table duck of all, although the redhead is a close competitor and the prairie-fed mallard and the black duck are extremely popular with the epicures. It is presumed that the canvasback gets its flavor from the wild celery buds which comprise a goodly part of its diet but in areas where this is not available the duck retains its table popularity.

The canvasback in migration flies in wedge-shaped flocks at rather high altitude. It flies with speed and directness, with its long slender neck outstretched and with noisy and rapid beatings of its sharp-pointed wings. It is an exceptionally fast flier with speeds variously estimated up to 70-90 miles an hour.

It prefers large bodies of water but is not exclusively a "large water" bird. It usually rests during the day at some distance from the shore but drifts in closer to feed. It has a habit of taking "constitutionals" morning and evening during which a flock will fly up and down the rest area several times, usually well out of gunshot range.

The bird is among the most inquisitive of the ducks and because of this trait it can often be enticed to well within gun range.

It is a strong underwater swimmer. For this reason it is difficult to recover a crippled bird.

The canvasback has a wide breeding range in the northern interior plains of North America but the great majority of these birds breed in the aspen parklands of Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba, and in the mixed grass and tall grass prairies of Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and northern North Dakota. Within the breeding range the canvasbacks are restricted largely to various types of deep water, cattail or bulrush marsh.

Recent extensive studies by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife show that the important primary migration route for the canvasback extends from the breeding grounds through the Dakotas, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and the Detroit River-Lake St. Clair area and then continues across the Appalachian Mountains and terminates at Chesapeake Bay. A noticeable segment of this flight apparently leaves

the main route to pass through the Lake Erie-New York Finger Lakes area before swerving down to Chesapeake Bay. Relatively small numbers of canvasbacks continue from Chesapeake Bay along the coast into south Atlantic States.

Secondary flights of considerable importance include one that leaves the main trunk line in the vicinity of southern Minnesota and southern Wisconsin and continues down the Mississippi Valley to the Gulf Coast; another extends from the interior of Alaska, the Prairie Provinces and the parklands of British Columbia to the coastal areas of northern California, Oregon and Washington. Another route goes through the Great Plains into Texas and on into Mexico.

Kill information compiled by the Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife is based upon the return of bands removed from ducks by hunters and from data supplied by hunters through the Bureau's postcard survey. Based on the data supplied by hunters the area of heaviest kill is in the Great Lakes region. Michigan and Wisconsin take nearly 17 percent of the total kill while Minnesota, North Dakota and South Dakota take more than 16 percent. Hunters of Maryland, North Carolina, and Virginia account for nearly 14 percent; Californians, 13 percent and Texans, 10 percent.

More than 83 percent of the canvasbacks winter in eastern United States. The outstanding wintering concentration areas are in the Chesapeake Bay region where more than half of these birds--53 percent--spend the winter months. Most of these are in the upper portions of the bay. Other important concentration areas include the San Francisco Bay section, where seven percent of the birds winter; southern Michigan, which winters six percent; the Mississippi Valley coastal region, five percent, and the central plateau of Mexico, five percent. Wintering populations in the east have a tendency to shift from time to time, with low counts in one major concentration often offset by high counts in another.

The 1958 breeding ground survey indicated that the already suffering species sustained further losses on the nesting grounds and that unless the one-in-a-thousand chance that a goodly number of them established a new nesting area unknown to the biologists, the chances are for a small flight of this species.

The redhead is similar to the canvasback in many ways. Its nesting preferences are quite similar and its migrations take it to the same general areas but in different concentrations. It is similar to the canvasback also in the fact that both winter and summer surveys show that it has been hurt by the protracted drought in the nesting area.

The redhead vies with the canvasback in table and hunter popularity and the total kill is nearly 400,000 annually, not much below that of the canvasback. On a percentage basis, however, the hunter toll is not as high as on the canvasback.

Unless there were redheads nesting in places where they could not be located by the biologists making the summer surveys in Canada the breeding population for the 1958 season was 40 percent below the 1956 figure in the major nesting areas. Much of the data upon which this figure is based is compiled by aerial surveys and Bureau of Sport Fisheries and Wildlife officials do not contend that this is a firm figure. They say that it is the best estimate they can make considering limitations

which naturally accompany the task of scrutinizing a lot of territory in a short time. But they do know that the number of breeding pairs seen in 1958 was far below that observed under the same conditions in 1956.

About 80 percent of the redheads winter in the Central Flyway. Most of these are found along the Texas coast and in the Laguna Madra in Mexico. The bulk of the kill is in the Central Flyway with the Mississippi Flyway a close second. In the 1957-58 season these two flyways accounted for 320,000 of the 380,000 redheads killed by hunters. The harvest in the Atlantic and Pacific Flyways was 28,000 and 1,000 respectively. Kill data indicates that Texas, the Dakotas, Michigan, Wisconsin and Minnesota are heavy-harvest States.

The redhead migrates in a V-shaped formation at great speed. It usually does considerable reconnoitering before landing, often passing and repassing an area several times before it begins to settle slowly onto the water. At times, especially if there are already redheads on the water, late comers will suddenly drop toward the water, each individual bird following its own zig-zag pattern, crossing and recrossing each others path. Like the canvasback, they take their daily "constitutitionals" and tend to stay away from shore during the day but drift in close to feed. They, too, are inquisitive and apt to play into the hands of the hunter.

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